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SYMPOSIUM—CHILD LABOR IN STREET TRADES AND PUBLIC PLACES

I.—THE NICKEL THEATRE

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The exhibit shown in connection with this Seventh Annual Conference of the National Child Labor Committee indicates a gradual change in attitude toward the child who, for one reason or another, has eked out an existence on the streets. These pictures tell the truth, investigation follows, and relief is on the way. Specialists and statisticians are revealing these conditions among newsboys, messenger boys and children of the stage, but as yet no definite and reliable figures have been given to help in the study of the child of the Nickel Theatre.

Almost over night this problem, so vitally affecting child life, has sprung up for consideration—the Problem of the Cheap Theatre. Cheap, because modern commercialism has a way of feeling the pulse of the multitude, and keeping pace with its fluctuations.

It is a long step from the drama of the Greeks to the Nickel Theatre of to-day. The theatre has always been “a place to see things.” In that day when the theatre was a state institution, it was a medium through which public thought and sentiment were moulded. Through dramatic representation of deeds of prowess, legendary tales, historic and social events of the age were depicted, and always with proper moral coloring; thereby to convey a spirit of patriotism and morality to the lives of the Athenian youth. Its mission was at once ethical and intellectual. What historian can calculate the effect of this ancient institution on the life of the time?

To-day, after the lapse of over 2,000 years, our civilization still has the theatre. It is still “a place to see things.” But organized society has turned over this historic educational institution to the promoters of pleasure and amusement, who, in course of time, have given our youth a substitute for what the state or community

ought long ago to have furnished, viz.: a wholesome outlet for his physical and emotional energies. That they have succeeded in capturing our children is proved by the estimated attendance of 400,000 children per day upon their performances.

Parents, school teachers, social workers, juvenile court officials and truant officers, together with personal interviews with boys and girls, and their consequent admissions, reveal conditions relating to the cheap theatre problem that make it of vital importance to this conference.

The remedy is a community problem: with the parent, who should not be satisfied with such artificial training of the emotional and imaginative instincts in his child, at one end; and the civic forces at the other, providing playgrounds and recreational centres for the masses who now throng these places. That the nickel show has met a long-felt need in furnishing inexpensive places of amusement for the masses, is freely admitted. But in the cheapness thereof lies its insidiousness. It is so easy for a girl, when sent to the corner grocery for 15 cents worth of coal oil, to get a dime's worth and save a nickel for the show. It is so very easy also, for the boy to sell his 32-cent school reader for a dime for the same purpose, and add falsehood and deception to theft by reporting to his mother "how he lost it."

These have an economic significance, but, of more importance still, is the reaction on the lives of growing boys and girls of the stimulating applications of nickel show vaudeville, and the emotional appeals to young and unemployed imaginations. Add to these the demoralizing effect of these performances on habits of study and the ever increasing demand for artificial amusements.

If these influences are baneful to the casual child attendant, how much more to the boy or girl who works therein from 10.30 a. m. to 10.30 p. m., six days a week? Of child employment on the stage the writer has read, but knows little from actual knowledge. Personal observation, however, would warrant saying that present conditions are better than in the earlier days of the nickel theatre. Especially is this true in smaller communities, where the force of public opinion is felt quickest. Close, personal contact with the problem indicates a graver danger, physically, mentally and morally, to the small girl habitu  , and the small boys who work therein as ushers and ticket takers.

We have paid much attention to the child of the textile industries and cotton mills, because we have seen them in groups and hordes. Their prematurely old faces and forms have excited our pity, and relief is coming their way. The same of children of the glass factories and boys in coal breakers. Even the baby workers in the cranberry bogs are claiming a due share of study. It will also be surprising if the children employed in the oyster industry on the Southern coast do not have the searchlight thrown upon their condition at this Conference.

These industries and mills, however, exist only here and there. In every town of importance in the United States these cheap theatres abound, and with few exceptions employ young boys or girls as ushers, ticket takers, or sellers.

The child works in the cotton mill because his parents, brothers and sisters work there. His small wage seems to them necessary for the maintenance of the family. He has been born and reared in the atmosphere of the mill, he knows nothing different, and cannot exercise any choice in the matter if he wanted to.

The breaker boy, I am told, likes to work in the mines, because he can chew tobacco and take on "manly habits." But as a general proposition, boys do not work for work's sake. However, allurements of association with other boys or men often influence the boy with a man's job. How dangerously different with the nickel theatre boy employee? He leaves school and seeks employment there, because of the unusual social stimuli attached to the place; because he is a boy with boy appetites, and *he really wants to*.

The writer has repeatedly obtained good positions for dependent boys in offices, stores and similar places, where they would have an opportunity to learn habits of business and thrift during the day, and have a due quota of time for leisure; only to see them quit without the slightest provocation to take a place with a nickel show at the same wage, or lower; their hours in the first position from 8 a. m. to 5 p. m., and in the latter from 10.30 a. m. to 10.30 p. m., and later on Saturdays.

Let us look these matters squarely in the face, as worthy of consideration from those specifically engaged in regulating public thought on children's affairs. Without elaboration we note the influences tending to physical deterioration for these classes of children:

<i>Physical Deterioration</i>	{ Continuous artificial light. Bad ventilation. Continuous eye strain, due to watching the pictures. Night work.
Materially, some of the effects are,	
<i>Material Effects</i>	{ Desire for constant change of employ- ment. Distaste for manual labor. Decreasing likelihood of learning a use- ful trade. Spending earnings to keep up appear- ances. Encouragement to spend earnings for cigarettes, chewing gum and "dope."

The average theatre boy needs his "dope"—whatever name it is known by—morning, noon and night, and between times when he can find the nickel with which to buy it.

Morally, some of the noticed effects are,

<i>Moral Effects</i>	{ Weakness of character, caused by forma- tion of habits of thriftlessness. Development of appetite for emotional excitement. Sordid stimuli to the imaginations. Premature knowledge of life. Undue emphasis on self-importance. Unusual opportunities to become delin- quent.
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Perhaps more important than these are the ill effects on the child's mentality.

Mr. Lovejoy last year pointed to the two million children employed in the industries, "to the exclusion of educational opportunity" as "serious, unless it can be shown that the industry itself gives that educational opportunity essential to good citizenship." In these industries the mental faculties are seldom brought into play. The intellect lies dormant until, perchance, the child is brought into school. In these children, the mental faculties are easily

awakened and cultivated. Not so with the boy who has had a vacational or continual occupation as theatre boy. The very nature of the employment, the lack of continuity in the scenes and acts themselves, the cultivated taste for the imaginative instead of the real, the appeal to the emotional side of life, together with constant contact with artificial effects and appearances, render the child unfit and unambitious for school training.

From the standpoint of highest mental possibilities to the boy or girl, the "nickel theatre job" is not merely passive or stagnating; it is expulsive and preclusive.

Should not this class of child labor be included in our coming child labor laws?